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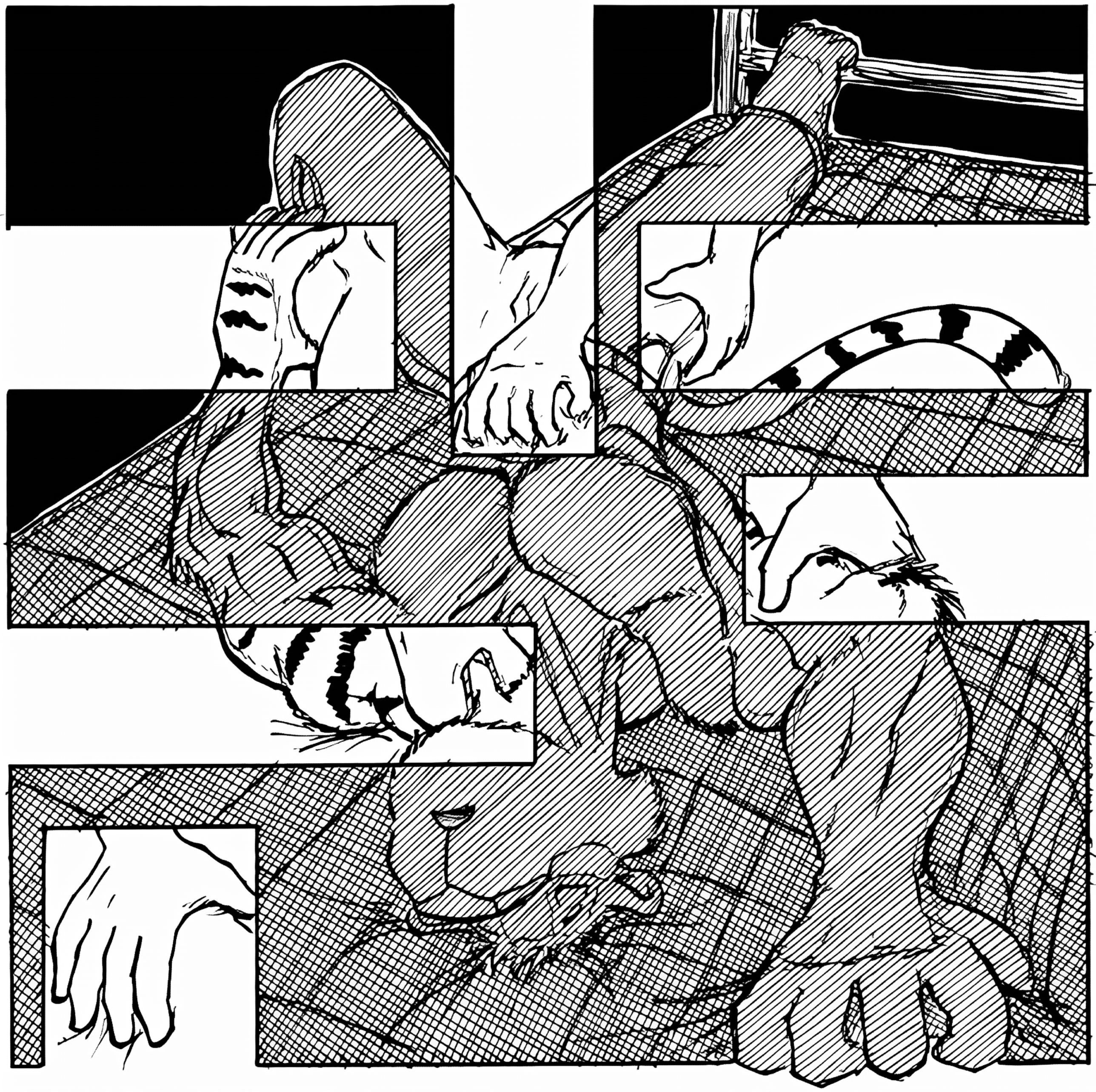
I.S.O.

CHAPTER 15

EYES OPEN

ART & STORY BY VINCE SUZUKAWA

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WHEW! WHAT A DREAM. AT LEAST... I THINK THAT WAS A DREAM. WASN'T IT?

WHAT TIME IS IT? IS IT STILL SATURDAY?

AW, MAN... DO I NEED TO GO CHANGE NOW?

OI! YER AWAIKEP

UM... YEAH.

SO...JAKE. *AHEM.* I KNOW WE HAD A GOOD TALK LAST NIGHT...

AND I BELIEVE YOU WERE FEELING A LITTLE...VULNERABLE. I HOPE YOU DON'T THINK I WAS...TRYING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE SITUATION?

HEH, HAURDLY... AI WAS TAIRED FROM NAUT 'AVIN' ANY SLEEP THE NAIGHT BEFOAH, AND YOU SEEMED WORN OUT TOO.

WE WERE BOTH PRETTY MUCH DROPPIN' OFF AFTAH A FEW MINUTES. YOU LOOKED SO COMFY, AI FIGURED YOU WOULDN'T MAIND SWAPPIN' BUNKS THIS ONCE.

OH, THANK GOODNESS. JUST A DREAM.

STILL...I DO HAVE A BOYFRIEND, AS I SAID. I REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE ANY OF THAT.

AW, WE DIDN'T GO VERY FAR, MAITE. IT'S ALL TOTALLY FOHGIVEABLE, IF YOU ASK ME.

SURE, WE PLAYED TONSIL TENNIS FOAH A BIT, BUT YOU STOPPED ME. LOOKED A BIT GUILTY, DON'CHA REMEMBAH?

HONESTLY, I DON'T.

WELL, T'BE HONEST...AI SURE WANTED TO KEEP GOIN', BUT LAIKE AI SAID...IT ALWAYS HAS TO BE CONSENSUAL.

OKAY, AI COULDN'T RESIST SNUGGLIN' YOU A BIT AFTAHWAHDS...NO STRINGS ATTACHED, MAIND YOU. BUT AI THINK YOU WERE ALREADY ASLEEP BAI THEN.

AND THEN THE BUNK FELT A BIT SMALL, SO I CAME UP HEAH. JEFF 'AS NOTHIN' TO WORREH ABOUT.

HECK, IF IT MAIKES 'IM FEEL BETTAH, YOU MUTTERED 'IS NAIME IN YOUR SLEEP--

WAIT... "JEFF"?!

YEAH...ALONG WITH A BUNCH OF OTHAH REALLY CUTE PET NAIMES. SO, THIS IS THAUT HOT LI'L HANDYMAN, RAIGHT?

UH. YEAH.

WELL, GOOD FOAH YOU! 'E SEEMS LAIKE A NAICE BLOKE. 'OPE YOU DON'T MAIND ME KNOWIN', AI GUESS IT COULD BE A TRAIFLE AWKWARD DATIN' SOMEONE ON FACULTY.

BUT...JEFF ISN'T MY BOYFRIEND, DOUG IS!

YEAH!

EH? DOUG? YER BIG COWORKAH?

OH. OOPS.

DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT KIND OF DREAM I WAS HAVIN'?

WELL, SINCE YER NAUT SAYIN' WOT IT IS, AI CAN GUESS...

DON'T BEAT YERSELF UP YET, MAITE. DOUG MAY NOT MAIND. HELL, 'E MAIGHT EVEN LAIKE A THREE WAY?

IF I DIDN'T ASK FIRST, IT DOESN'T MATTER. AND THE KICKER IS, I'VE NEVER HAD ANY DREAM LIKE THAT ABOUT HIM.

OI, IT'S LAITE, CODY. MAYBE YOU'LL FEEL BETTAH IF YOU GET A LITTLE REST.

NAH, I'M GONNA TAKE A WALK. I NEED TO... THINK.

GOOD LUCK TO YA.

THERE YOU ARE...

MISS ME?

YOU STUD! SAY, IF YA GET IT ON WITH DOUG TONIGHT, IT'LL BE LIKE HAVING HIM, JAKE, AND JEFF ALL WITHIN 24 HOURS!

FEH! S'ONLY A DREAM, IT DON'T MEAN NOTHIN'. C'MON, IT'S THA FIRST TIME YA FULLY GAVE INTO YER URGES. RUN WITH IT WHILE YA CAN!

WHAT?! SEX IS THE LAST THING WE NEED NOW! THIS WAS A SIGN OF SOME SERIOUS ISSUES, NOT A...A WARM UP!

ONLY WHEN YOU'RE SURE YOU'RE NOT PROJECING YOUR FEELINGS FOR DOUG ONTO JEFF, JUST FOR CONVENIENCE'S SAKE.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH A LI'L VARIETY IN YER FANTASIES?

SURE, YOU'VE ***HEARD*** OF IT. BUT DO YA REALLY KNOW WHAT IT MEANS?

YA CONNECT WITH JEFF JUST AS WELL AS WITH DOUG--IF NOT BETTER.

UM, IT'S CALLED BEING IN LOVE. EVER HEARD OF IT?

WELL, YOU MADE YOUR CHOICE. AND YOU'VE PUT A LOT OF WORK INTO IT, AND SO HAS DOUG.

AND HE STILL COULDN'T GET PAST YER MENTAL BLOCKS. YET JAKE AND JEFF DID. AIN'T THAT A SIGN THEY EARNED IT?

WELL, IF DOUG'S GONNA GET HIS PANTS IN A BUNCH OVER ONE TINY MISTAKE...

THAT'S NOT YOUR POSITION TO DECIDE. IT'S DOUG'S.

LOOK, IF YOU CAN'T DEVOTE YOUR ATTENTION TO JUST ONE PERSON...

MAYBE YOU SHOULD BREAK UP WITH DOUG, THEN.

WHA?

DID WE JUST...?

BREAK UP? WHERE DID THAT COME FROM? I CAN'T JUST DO THAT.

CAN I?

ISN'T DOUG EVERYTHING YOU WANTED IN A BOYFRIEND? OR AT LEAST...WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU WANTED?

SURE. HE'S NICE, SWEET, EASYGOING, AND INCREDIBLY HOT...WELL, JUST LIKE JEFF. AND JAKE. AND HECK, EVEN NATE, AND TODD. WHAT MAKES YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH DOUG UNIQUE?

HE'S...QUIET. PASSIVE. WHICH SHOULD'VE BEEN THE PERFECT MATCH FOR THE BIG OL' MACHO TIGER. HE'S PRETTY MUCH WHAT EVERYONE EXPECTED YOU TO END UP WITH. PARTICULARLY DOUG HIMSELF. AND YOU'RE NOT LIVING UP TO THAT.

YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD. BUT SO MUCH HAS HAPPENED OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS.

MAYBE IT IS BETTER TO STEP BACK. MAYBE YOU NEED TO ASK DOUG IF HE'S SEEN THE REAL YOU. AND YOU NEED TO SHOW HIM. TELL HIM. BECAUSE YOU JUST FEEL AWKWARD WHEN HE HAS ANY EXPECTATIONS.

AND IT SHOULDN'T BE AWKWARD; IT SHOULD BE NATURAL. YOU FEEL HAPPY WHEN YOU JUST HANG OUT WITH HIM...AS YOU SHOULD. BUT MAYBE THAT JUST MAKES YOU FRIENDS. AND DOUG DESERVES MORE THAN THAT.

SO. WOW.

NOW THAT YOU'VE LAID ALL THE CARDS ON THE TABLE...YOU SURE YOU CAN'T TAKE THINGS ANY FURTHER FROM HERE?

I GUESS THAT ANSWERS MY QUESTION.

THAT AFTERNOON...

DOUG, I...

I... UM...

SIGH... LET ME MAKE THIS EASIER FOR YOU.

I KNOW THIS RELATIONSHIP IS GOING NOWHERE, TOO. SO I AGREE, BREAKING UP IS PROBABLY FOR THE BEST.

HUH? WHA--YOU DO?!

WAIT... HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT'S WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY?

CODY, C'MON. IT'S ***NEVER*** A GOOD SIGN WHEN YOU GET A TEXT MESSAGE FROM YOUR BOYFRIEND AT 3AM THAT SAYS "WE NEED TO TALK."

POINT...

UM...YOU SEEM RATHER SURPRISED.

I WAS... KIND OF BRACING MYSELF FOR THIS ALL WEEKEND. AND I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THIS FOR AWHILE.

YEAH, SORTA. YOU MEAN YOU'RE NOT?

AWHILE, HUH? BUT YOU JUST DROP IT LIKE THAT ON ME, WITH NO WARNING?

NO, NO, I WAS PLANNING TO GIVE YOU ONE LAST CHANCE ON OUR DATE TONIGHT...

REALISTICALLY, THOUGH? I WAS ALMOST POSITIVE NOTHING WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

SO I'D DECIDED, IF YOU BAILED AGAIN, THEN--

THEN WHAT? YOU WERE GOING TO DUMP ME... OVER SEX?

WELL, ONLY IF YOU INSIST ON PUTTING IT THAT WAY, CUZ--

IF IT'S "JUST SEX", THEN ***WHY THE HELL WOULDN'T YOU DO IT WITH ME?***

WHAT, IS THAT WHAT THIS ENTIRE RELATIONSHIP IS BUILT AROUND? COME ON, IT'S JUST SEX!

TOUCHE'...

I APPRECIATE THAT YOU NEEDED SOME TIME. BUT WE'RE MEN. AND I KNOW ALL MEN INEVITABLY GET...

...URGES. AND OFTEN TIMES, THEY CAN'T RESIST ACTING ON THEM.

EVEN YOU?

YES, BUT NOT IF I COULD HELP IT. AND IT WAS DIFFICULT. REALLY DIFFICULT. HECK... I SORTA HAVE A CRUSH ON TIM, AND HE'D BE AN EASY OUTLET...BUT WE NEVER FOLLOWED THROUGH WITH IT.

WE RESPECT THE BOUNDARIES OF RELATIONSHIPS; IT'S EITHER ALL OR NOTHING. DITTO FOR ROBBIE AND TREVOR...AND THEY'VE ALL SUPPORTED ME ON THIS.

BUT I KNOW I'M AN UNUSUAL CASE, AND IT'S GETTING HARDER TO FIND YOUNG GAY GUYS WHO FEEL THE SAME WAY.

THE ODDS OF SOMEONE BEING UNFAITHFUL ARE BAD ENOUGH. AND WHEN THEY REFUSE TO DO ANYTHING WITH YOU EITHER...IT RAISES SUSPICIONS. AND PEOPLE WILL TALK...

WHAT, SO YOU ALL EXPECTED ME TO CHEAT ON YOU?

NOT NECESSARILY. BUT YOU CAN ONLY HOLD OUT FOR SO LONG... THERE HAS TO BE ***SOME*** RELEASE. YOU ALMOST GAVE IN ONCE, AND YOU DON'T SEEM ALL THAT... ATTUNED TO YOUR HORMONES.

YEAH, WELL, I...

SO YOU DID--!

WAIT, WAIT, LET ME EXPLAIN!

I FINALLY STRAIGHTENED THINGS OUT IN MY HEAD OVER THE WEEKEND.

IT'S NOT THAT I WAS AFRAID OF SEX PER SE, I WAS JUST STALLING ON CONFIRMING MY ORIENTATION. SEX WITH A MAN WOULD BE... SEALING THE DEAL, BASICALLY.

BUT OF COURSE, I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE THAT LEAP EVENTUALLY, AND ACCEPTING THAT NOW KINDA LIFTED THE MENTAL BLOCK.

THE THING IS, AS SOON AS I SORTED ALL THIS OUT, I...

..IMMEDIATELY MADE OUT WITH MY HOT AND VERY PROMISCUOUS ROOMMATE...



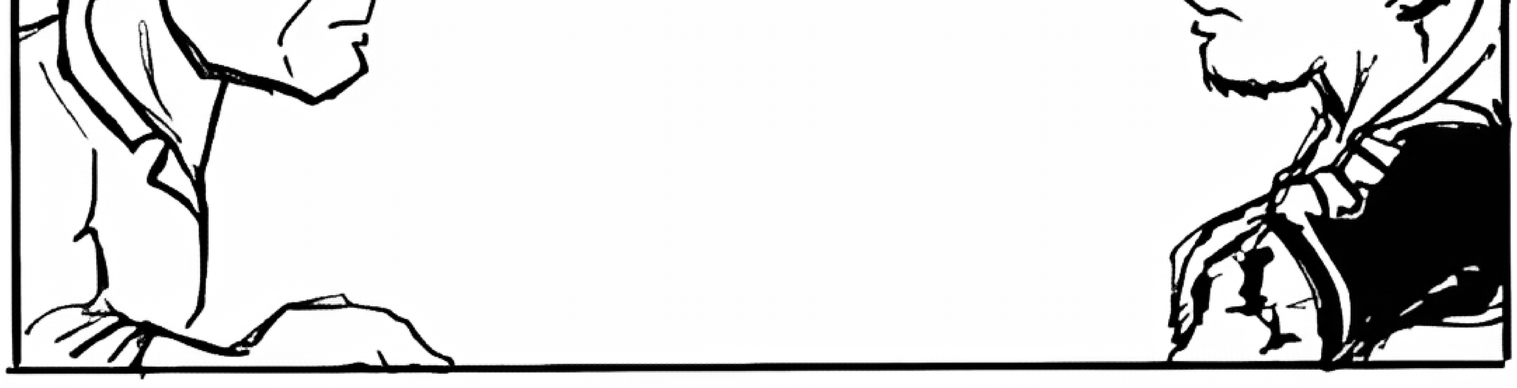
*..AND FOLLOWED **THAT** UP WITH A MASSIVELY EROTIC DREAM ABOUT THE FRIEND WHO I'D JUST PUSHED AWAY CUZ I FEARED I WAS FALLING FOR HIM!*

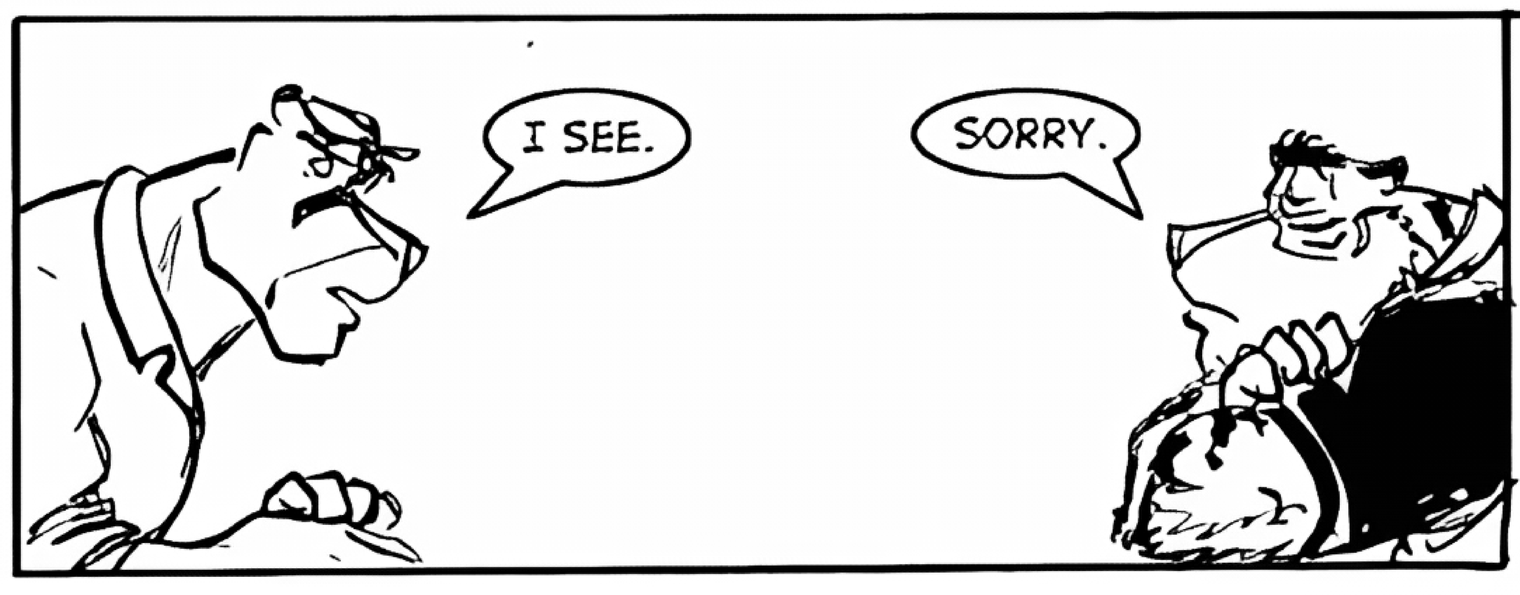




THIS WAS NO SPONTANEOUS URGE. NO OUTBURST OR LOSS OF CONTROL. THIS WAS JUST FINALLY ALLOWING MYSELF TO EXPERIENCE WHAT FELT RIGHT, FOR THE FIRST TIME.







DID I COME ON TOO STRONG? I'M SORRY I PRESSURED YOU... IT LOOKED LIKE YOU WERE GETTING INTO IT.

OH, I WAS.... WHEN WE WERE MAKING OUT LIKE THERE WAS NO TOMORROW, IT WAS INCREDIBLE.

BUT BEYOND A CERTAIN POINT, IT DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT. CUZ I KNEW YOU WERE WAITING FOR ME TO...TAKE CHARGE.

YYYYEAH.

I MEAN, *TOTALLY* TAKE CHARGE.

AHEH... OH, THAT.

YOU COULD TELL, HUH?

I... PICKED UP ON IT.

AND IF THAT'S WHAT YOU DESIRED...WELL, I THOUGHT I COULD DO IT.

I HOPED ONCE I GOT PAST MY SHYNESS IT'D ALL FALL INTO PLACE. BUT IT DIDN'T.

...AND I WANTED OUR FIRST TIME TO BE... SPECIAL...

THEN AGAIN, IF THAT'S WHAT GOT YOU EXCITED...YOU WOULD'VE BEEN WITH TIM ALREADY.

...I WANTED IT TO BE WHAT *YOU* WANTED, TOO. AND IF THAT'S WHAT IT WAS GOING TO TAKE, THEN...I HAD TO WAIT 'TIL IT FELT RIGHT.

POSSIBLY.

WELL, THAT'S SWEET OF YOU, BUT IT WASN'T NECESSARY.

YOU SURE? WOULD YOU EVEN HAVE GONE AFTER ME IN THE FIRST PLACE IF I'D BEEN PLEASANT AND POLITE?

C'MON, DOUG. I'VE HEARD YOU'RE ALWAYS CHASING BAD BOYS. WHY DON'T YOU TRY FINDING, Y'KNOW, BETTER... HUSBAND MATERIAL?

HEY NOW!

WHY ELSE DO YOU THINK I HELD OUT SO LONG FOR YOU? I SAW THROUGH YOUR MACHO ACT PRETTY EASILY, AND I COULD TELL YOU HAD A... VULNERABLE SIDE UNDERNEATH. BUT I PLAYED ALONG ANYWAY, AND LET YOU BE THE BIG MAN...CUZ I THOUGHT WE BOTH WANTED IT THAT WAY.

OF COURSE I THOUGHT I WANTED TO BE VULNERABLE AND MACHO! I'M A HORMONALLY UNSTABLE TEENAGER, IT'S PRACTICALLY MY SWORN DUTY TO SEEK OUT A NEW IDENTITY EVERY WEEK. THROW IN BEING CLOSETED, AND YOU'RE LUCKY I DIDN'T DITCH YOU FOR A MONASTERY.

FORGIVE ME FOR GIVING YOU TOO MUCH CREDIT! IT'S NOT LIKE YOU WORE A SIGN SAYING "BRB, STILL MATURING, LOL."

AND DON'T DENY YOU LIKED THE FACT THAT I'M ON THE PASSIVE SIDE. WERE ***YOU*** JUST HUNTING FOR GOOD ***WIFE*** MATERIAL?

WELL...OKAY, YOU GOT ME THERE. SO MAYBE NEITHER OF US REALLY KNEW WHAT WE WANTED. AND HONESTLY, I'M STILL NOT SURE IF I DO. BUT I'M PRETTY SURE THE BEST PERSON WHO CAN HELP ME FIGURE IT OUT...IS SOMEONE ON EQUAL GROUND.

I'M NOT SAYING YOU'RE NOT.

BUT YOU HAVE TO WANT THE SAME THING.

DO YOU?

YOU KNOW MY ANSWER.

AND I KNOW THE ***RIGHT*** ANSWER.

AND... I THINK IT'S NOT FAIR FOR ME TO MAKE YOU WAIT UNTIL I CAN GET THEM TO MATCH.

C'MON, DOUG. I'VE HEARD YOU'RE ALWAYS CHASING BAD BOYS. WHY DON'T YOU TRY FINDING, Y'KNOW, BETTER... HUSBAND MATERIAL?

HEY, NOW!

WHY ELSE DO YOU THINK I WAS SO INTO YOU? I THOUGHT I'D HIT THE JACKPOT AFTER ALL THOSE PUNKS...SOMEONE WITH THE TOUGH GUY ACT, WHO'S HIDING A... MORE VULNERABLE SIDE UNDERNEATH. TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE, AND ALL.

THAT'S THE THING... NONE OF IT EVER REALLY WAS TRULY AN ACT, ***OR*** A HIDDEN SIDE WITH ME. I'M JUST THAT FRICKIN' MESSED UP. C'MON, WHAT DID YOU REALLY EXPECT FROM A CLOSETED FRESHMAN? STABILITY? RATIONALITY?

FORGIVE ME FOR GIVING YOU TOO MUCH CREDIT! IT'S NOT LIKE YOU WORE A SIGN SAYING "BRB, STILL MATURING, LOL."

AND DON'T PRETEND YOU DIDN'T JUST LOVE BEING THE MAN IN THE RELATIONSHIP. YOU SURE YOU WEREN'T ONLY HUNTING FOR GOOD ***WIFE*** MATERIAL?

OKAY, OKAY, FAIR ENOUGH. I MADE A LOT OF MISTAKES ABOUT WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR TOO. BUT I'M PRETTY SURE WHAT I REALLY WANT...***NEED***... IS SOMEONE ON EQUAL GROUND.

I THINK YOU DO TOO.

BUT JUST BECAUSE WE HAVE THE SAME GOALS...

I THINK WE CAN STILL TRY TO HELP...

THAT DOESN'T MEAN WE KNOW HOW HELP EACH OTHER MEET THEM.

JUST... MAYBE FROM A LITTLE MORE OF A DISTANCE.

SO...

YEAH, UH... I DUNNO...IS THAT IT?

WELL...AT THE VERY LEAST, WE SHOULD... EXPLORE OTHER OPTIONS. START FROM SCRATCH, WITH NEW PRIORITIES. AND YOU NEVER KNOW, WE COULD FIND OUT OUR GUT INSTINCTS WERE RIGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

MAYBE...

EITHER WAY...THANKS FOR EVERYTHING. AND GOOD LUCK.

LIKEWISE.

OH! ER, SORRY...

DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE STILL HERE.

S'OKAY, I WAS JUST LEAVING.

SAY, TIM... HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT... MAYBE YOU AND DOUG--

WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU THINKING?!

IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!

--WORKING TOGETHER AT THE HANGOUT?

HEH, DUNNO. WHY DO YOU ASK?

I DUNNO, I JUST HAD THIS VISION OF YOU AS A BOUNCER.

HEY, I'VE SEEN YOU IN ACTION. YOU'D EASILY DISPOSE OF ANY PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY GET OUT OF HAND.

ME? I DON'T EVEN OWN ANY BLACK CLOTHING!

I'LL HAVE TO PRACTICE MY SCOWLING FIRST...

PHEW, DEFLECTED THAT ISSUE. NOW I JUST GOTTA JAM--

BESIDES, YOU ALREADY ARE THE--

OH. I GET IT.

YOU'RE QUITTING THE HANGOUT, CUZ... *"SIGH"* I THOUGHT MAYBE YOU'D TALKED DOUG OUT OF BREAKING UP, BUT...UM, YEAH. BUMMER.

I DON'T KNOW IF I HAVE MUCH CHOICE. IT WAS A MUTUAL DECISION FOR DOUG AND ME BUT...IT COULD GET AWKWARD WITH SAM THERE. I'LL BET SHE'S GONNA BE ***PISSED***.

SAM'S A TOUGH COOKIE, FOR SURE. BUT SHE ONLY WANTS THE BEST FOR DOUG.

AND I THINK NOW SHE'S AWARE THAT YOU DO TOO.

THANKS, TIM.

TAKE CARE...

IF IT HELPS, CODY...YOU'RE NEW TO DATING. AND THE ODDS OF FINDING YOUR LIFE PARTNER ON THE VERY FIRST TRY... ARE PRETTY SLIM. SAM KNEW THE ODDS. AND...I THINK EVEN DOUG DID, TOO.

ALL IN ALL, THAT WAS SURPRISINGLY DRAMA-FREE. NO WATER WORKS, SHOUTING, BROKEN DISHES...

I THOUGHT IT WOULD HURT MORE TO..HURT TO...TO...

T-TODD? CALL ME WHEN YOU LAND? PLEASE? THANKS... *"CHOKE"*

UM... GO AHEAD AND... LET IT ALL OUT, DUDE.

SORRY, I'M NEW TO THIS...

YOU MAY FEEL SILLY AT FIRST, CODY, BUT TRUST ME...IT HELPS.

HERE.

T-THANKS FOR THIS, YOU GUYS. I... I THOUGHT I HAD IT ALL UNDER CONTROL. BUT, BUT...I...

YEAH. I CAN'T BELIEVE I WAS SO...STUPID. I NEVER SAW IT COMING.

DIDN'T EXPECT HIM TO WANT TO BREAK UP TOO?

AW, CUT YOURSELF SOME SLACK. YOU'RE LEARNING.

STILL. THE WORST PART IS...IT'S NOT JUST THE SELF-PITY. I ALSO FEEL TERRIBLE FOR WASTING HIS TIME. EVERYONE'S TIME.

DON'T BE THAT WAY, YOU TWO HAD FUN TOGETHER, EVEN AT WORK. HE'LL HAVE PLENTY OF GOOD MEMORIES ABOUT IT.

AND WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, BECAUSE OF HIM, YOU AND I MADE UP QUICKLY. THAT'S NO WASTE OF TIME, IS IT?

AND THEN WE STARTED HANGING OUT CUZ DOUG DRAGGED YOU TO KYELL'S. SO DON'T WRITE OFF THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE. THIS SEMESTER HAS BEEN ONE HELL OF A ROLLER COASTER RIDE WITH YOU.

AND WE'RE ALL GLAD TO HAVE BEEN A PART OF IT.

TELL 'IM, BORIS.

BRRING-BRRING

CRAP. HANG ON...

IT...IT'S JEFF...

I WAS WONDERING WHERE HE WAS! TELL HIM I CAN LET HIM IN DOWNSTAIRS.

OH, I NEVER GOT TO THAT PART. JEFF AND I WERE ON HIATUS CUZ WE MIGHT HAVE FEELINGS FOR EACH OTHER, BUT I NEEDED DOUG TO HAVE MY FULL ATTENTION. HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED YET.

HUH?

HELLO--

SAY WHAT?

HANG UP! YOU CAN'T TALK TO HIM RIGHT NOW!

WHY NOT? HE MUST HAVE A GOOD REASON TO END THE BREAK.

C'MON. YOU *JUST* BROKE UP WITH YOUR BOYFRIEND, AND HE RESURFACES.

COINCIDENCE? I THINK NOT!

AND AFTER WHAT HAPPENED WITH JAKE, ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT JUST GONNA...GIVE IN TO HIM, TOO?

HELLO? CODY?

MMM... WOULD THAT BE SUCH A BAD THING?

BESIDES, EVEN IF YOU DIDN'T, IT'LL STILL LOOK WEIRD.

LIKE YOU'RE REBOUNDING RIGHT AWAY.

MAYBE YOU SHOULD WAIT 'TIL YOU'RE A BIT MORE... RECOVERED?

YOU THERE?

OH, MAN, THAT'S HOT.

I THINK I'M ON A BAD CONNECTION; LEMME CALL BACK IN A SEC.

YOO-HOO. EARTH TO NATE. CAN WE STICK TO THE SUBJECT AT HAND, PLEASE?

HEY, I JUST GOT A TEXT...

FUNNY YOU SHOULD SAY THAT.

IF THE SUBJECTS *ARE* A HAND AND A ST--

inbox

mind if i say something here?

LA LA LA!

LA LA LA!

WHO SENT...? OH.

SO LEMME GET THIS STRAIGHT, BRO. YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT HE HAS TO SAY, AND YOU'RE ALREADY FREAKIN' OUT OVER IT?

WELL, THEY'RE RIGHT, THIS REALLY ISN'T A GOOD TIME.

CODY, IS THERE *EVER* A GOOD TIME WITH YOU?

LOOKY HERE, MAN. WHENEVER SOMETHING DOES NOT GO EXACTLY ACCORDING TO PLAN-- AS LIFE OFTEN DOES--YOU TURN TAIL! YOU EITHER HOPE THINGS WORK OUT FOR THE BEST, OR YOU WAIT UNTIL SOMEONE CHASES YOU DOWN AND CORNERS YOU.

ONCE IN A WHILE, YOU NEED TO GROW UP, GROW A PAIR, AND MEET THINGS HEAD ON!

WELL, I...

HUH. Y'KNOW... HE'S SEEN OR HEARD ABOUT IT ALL THE TIME...WHENEVER SOMEONE CONFRONTS ME, I...

BRRING-BRRING

BENEFRIENDS?

BAD FRIENDS?

EJECT! EJECT!

BEST FRIENDS?

BOYFRIENDS?

ALL I'M SAYIN', IS OPEN COMMUNICATION IS THE BEST WAY TO SORT OUT YOUR PROBLEMS. TAKE IT FROM SOMEONE WHO KNOWS.

Y'KNOW, HE'S RIGHT.

TOTALLY. GO ON, PICK IT UP. WE'RE RIGHT HERE IF YOU NEED US.

BRRRING-BRRRING

BRRRING-BRRRING

HEY, JEFF? SORRY 'BOUT THAT...

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CHAPTER 16

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

HEY. THANKS FOR COMING OUT HERE.

NO PROB. YOU GOIN' ALL NATURE BOY ON ME?

IN THIS CAR? HA! I ONLY WANTED SOME PRIVACY. BUT...IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU. I HATED JUST LEAVING THINGS THE WAY THEY WERE.

YEAH, LIKEWISE...

I'M... SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT DOUG.

THANKS. HE AND I KINDA AGREED IT WASN'T MEANT TO BE.

STILL... THAT'S WHY I CALLED IN THE FIRST PLACE...

I'D WANTED TO APOLOGIZE FOR OVERSTEPPING MY BOUNDARIES AS A FRIEND. WE WOULDN'T HAVE FOUGHT IF I'D JUST DROPPED IT.

HELP, SURE, BUT NOT INTERFERENCE. YOU WERE ALREADY OVERTHINKING, YOU DIDN'T NEED PSYCHOBABBLE ON TOP OF THAT...BUT I KEPT PICKING YOUR BRAIN APART ANYWAY. I SHOULD HAVE LET YOU FIGURE THINGS OUT ON YOUR OWN.

CODY...I WAS...PUSHING YOU TO STAY WITH DOUG, EVEN THOUGH I KINDA DOUBTED YOU'D LAST.

AW, YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT. YOU KNEW I WANTED YOUR HELP.

HUH? W-WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?

BECAUSE I WANTED YOU.

OKAY, JUST CUZ YOU ADMITTED THAT ALREADY, DOESN'T MEAN IT MAKES ANY MORE SENSE...

I KNOW, I KNOW, I'LL EXPLAIN...

WHEN WE FIRST MET, I COULD TELL YOU NEEDED A FRIEND. WHEN IT TURNED OUT YOU NEEDED A MENTOR, I FELT IT WAS MORE IMPORTANT TO BE THERE FOR YOU IN THAT CAPACITY, THAN WORRY IF I WAS GOING TO FALL FOR YOU.

AND THEN WE HAD A LOT OF FUN TOGETHER, AND... YEAH, I FELL FOR YOU. MUCH EARLIER THAN I'VE LET ON, REALLY. IT WAS STUPID OF ME, BUT I DID. STILL, YOU WERE SO DISTRACTED WITH DOUG, I HOPED YOU WOULDN'T NOTICE.

SO I DID ALL I COULD TO HELP THINGS ALONG...AND MORE BEYOND THAT. DOUG SEEMED LIKE A SWEET, QUALITY GUY, AND I WAS HAPPY WHEN YOU TWO FINALLY HOOKED UP.

I HONESTLY WASN'T SURE HOW COMPATIBLE YOU GUYS WOULD BE TOGETHER, BUT I FIGURED ONCE YOU WERE SET UP WITH HIM, YOU COULD HANDLE IT FROM THERE.

INSTEAD, YOU KEPT COMING TO ME FOR ADVICE...AND PART OF ME WONDERED IF YOU WANTED MORE. AND WHILE I WAS HAPPY TO COUNSEL YOU, IT JUST MADE US EVEN CLOSER.

AND ALL THE WHILE, I KNEW I WAS BEING OBSERVED. AND I KNEW THAT NO MATTER HOW I TRIED TO HIDE MY FEELINGS, IT WAS DANGEROUS FOR US TO BE AS CLOSE AS WE WERE.

SO THE MORE ASSISTANCE I COULD GIVE TO KEEP YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH DOUG GOING, THE BETTER. MAYBE IF I GRABBED AT ENOUGH STRAWS, THERE'D BE A BREAKTHROUGH THAT'D STICK. CUZ THAT WAS THE ONLY WAY I COULD AVOID AROUSING ANY MORE SUSPICION. THE ONLY WAY I COULD PROTECT YOU.

THAT'S CRAZY. WHAT KINDA CONSPIRACY IS THIS? "PROTECT" ME? PROTECT ME FROM WHO?

MY SISTER, MAUREEN.

SISTER? WHAT'S SHE GOT AGAINST ME?!

IT'S NOT YOU SPECIFICALLY, IT'S CUZ I...*SIGH*, IT'S KINDA COMPLICATED.

YOU GOT A HOT DATE?

FAIR ENOUGH. JUST... LET ME START AT THE BEGINNING...

SHE'S... NOT A BAD PERSON. HONESTLY. THOUGH YOU COULD SAY SHE WAS ALWAYS THE ODD ONE OUT IN OUR FAMILY. OUR PARENTS WERE RATHER EASYGOING SORTS, AND I PRETTY MUCH INHERITED THAT FROM THEM.

MAUREEN, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS AMBITIOUS AND DRIVEN. NONE OF US EVER QUITE UNDERSTOOD WHY; WE WERE NEVER RICH, TO BE SURE, BUT WERE COMFORTABLE ENOUGH. STILL, SHE ALWAYS SEEMED POISED TO MOVE ON TO BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS.

AND WE ALL KNEW SHE'D BE A SUCCESS--SHE HAD THE BRAINS, TALENT, AND CHARISMA TO BACK IT UP. I'M SURE YOU KNEW THE TYPE "A" SORT IN SCHOOL; POPULAR, VALEDICTORIAN, PLUS, A TON OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, YADDA YADDA..AND INEVITABLY, IVY LEAGUE SCHOOLS BEATING DOWN OUR DOOR WITH SCHOLARSHIPS... SHE TURNED THEM DOWN LEFT AND RIGHT BEFORE MAKING HER DECISION. AND THAT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

IT TURNED OUT TO BE A BIT OF A CULTURE SHOCK BEING AROUND SOME OF THE WEALTHIER STUDENTS. MORE THAN EVER, I THINK SHE WANTED TO BE A PART OF THAT WORLD.

REALLY, THOUGH, I THINK SHE FRETTED TOO MUCH ABOUT FITTING IN. HER WORK ALWAYS SPOKE FOR ITSELF.

AND SPEAK IT DID. SHE GRADUATED MAGNA CUM LAUDE, MADE SHORT WORK OF THE LSAT, AND WENT STRAIGHT TO LAW SCHOOL. WE WERE WORRIED SHE'D BURN HERSELF OUT, BUT SHE RATHER SEEMED TO ENJOY THE CHALLENGE.

BUT MY PARENTS NEVER GOT TO SEE HER GET HER LAW DEGREE. THEY WERE BOTH KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT JUST BEFORE SHE GRADUATED.

WHAT? OH, MAN, JEFF. I'M SO SORRY. I HAD NO IDEA...YOU NEVER TALK ABOUT THEM.

THANKS, BUT...WELL, THERE WAS OTHER BAGGAGE I DIDN'T WANT TO BRING UP.

Y'SEE, THE OTHER DRIVER GOT OFF PRETTY EASILY. I WASN'T PLEASED BY THIS, BUT I BELIEVE ACCIDENTS HAPPEN.

MAUREEN, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS REALLY BITTER ABOUT IT, BLAMING THE JUDGE FOR THE SENTENCE. THAT KIND OF SOLIDIFIED HER DECISION TO BECOME A JUDGE HERSELF--AND AS SOON AS SHE COULD.

SHE'D ALWAYS BEEN THE ONE WITH A STRONG SENSE OF JUSTICE, I GUESS.

ONCE SHE'D SECURED HER FIRST JOB, HER MISSION WAS CLEAR. IT'D TAKE A LOT OF WORK TO ACCELERATE THE GAME PLAN AS MUCH AS SHE INTENDED, BUT SHE WAS GOING TO DO IT.

THERE WAS ONLY ONE SACRIFICE THAT WOULD HAVE TO BE MADE. BUT SHE FELT SHE'D BE ABLE TO GET TO IT AT SOME POINT.

LEMME GUESS, SHE BECAME YOUR LEGAL GUARDIAN, AND NOW SHE'S MAD CUZ TAKING CARE OF YOU SLOWED HER CAREER?

OH, SHE DID, BUT THAT WASN'T AN ISSUE.

I WAS SIXTEEN AND PRETTY INDEPENDENT ANYWAY. IT WASN'T LIKE I SAW MUCH OF HER, SHE WAS ALWAYS WORKING.

BUT WE'D NEVER BEEN CLOSE CUZ OF OUR NINE YEAR AGE GAP, AND AS I SAID, WE HAD DIFFERENT MINDSETS. I KNEW I'D MAKE A LIVING WITH MY HANDS RATHER THAN A DEGREE, AND OUR PARENTS NEVER PUSHED COLLEGE ON ME...SO I CONCENTRATED ON HONING MY SKILLS, RATHER THAN MY EDUCATION.

MAUREEN WAS..RESPECTFUL OF THIS, BUT I KNOW SHE WAS DISAPPOINTED, AS SHE THOUGHT I COULD DO BETTER.

SO I FIGURED I SHOULD MOVE OUT AS SOON AS I HIT EIGHTEEN.

I COULDN'T AFFORD MUCH, BUT I LANDED A FULL-TIME JOB WITH A LOCAL PLUMBER, AND I FELT MY CAREER PATH WAS PRETTY WELL SET.

GRANTED, I WAS STILL THE LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE, AND INITIALLY I WAS STUCK ON-CALL FOR OUR 24-HOUR EMERGENCY LINE.

ONE EVENING... OR I GUESS MORNING, I WAS CALLED OUT TO A NEIGHBORHOOD I'D NEVER SET FOOT IN. PRETTY SWANKY, WHERE ALL THE MOVIE STARS ARE AND STUFF.

I HAD NO IDEA HOW SOMEONE LIKE THAT FOUND OUR NUMBER..I DIDN'T THINK THEY ASSOCIATED WITH US PEONS, AND YOU HAD TO KNOW THE FRIEND OF A FRIEND OF A FRIEND TO WORK FOR THEM.

BUT HEY, WHO AM I TO ARGUE?

COOL, WAS IT ANYONE FAMOUS?

WELL... PROBABLY NOT SOMEONE YOU'D KNOW. HE TURNED OUT TO BE WENDELL WILLOUGHBY III, GRANDSON OF A BIG-TIME LOCAL SHIPPING MAGNATE.

...OH.

SORRY. ANYWAY, IT WAS HIS ASSISTANT'S NIGHT OFF, AND HE HAD PANICKED AT A BIT OF A WASHROOM DISASTER. WE JUST HAPPENED TO BE THE FIRST 24-HOUR SERVICE HE FOUND.

I COULD TELL HE'D NEVER LIFTED A FINGER IN HIS LIFE. IT WASN'T A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TASK, BUT I DID PLAY IT UP A LITTLE. NO DENYING MY BOSS WOULD LIKE THE REFERENCE.

I TRIED TO IMPRESS HIM, AND EVIDENTLY I SUCCEEDED.

I ENDED UP GETTING CALLED BACK FOR SOME OTHER MINOR WORK-- DURING NORMAL BUSINESS HOURS, OF COURSE. HE SOON DISCOVERED I HAD EXPERIENCE IN DOING ALL KINDS OF REPAIRS, AND CONTRACTED ME FOR SOME OTHER TASKS, TOO.

I IMPRESSED HIM THERE, AS WELL.

SO OVER THE COURSE OF THAT YEAR, I PICKED UP VARIOUS TIDBITS ABOUT WENDELL.

HE WAS AN ONLY CHILD, FRESH OFF AN EXTENSIVE EDUCATION, AND HIS DOTING FAMILY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO WITH HIM EVER SINCE HE DECIDED HE WAS GOING TO WRITE THE NEXT GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL...THEY KINDA LEFT HIM TO HIS OWN DEVICES ALONE IN THIS BIG HOUSE.

AND I GOT TO THINKING...

MAUREEN'S BIOLOGICAL CLOCK WAS TICKING LOUDER AS SHE APPROACHED THIRTY, AND I KNOW SHE WAS RECEPTIVE TO MEETING MR. RIGHT, BUT HER JOB LEFT NO TIME TO SEARCH.

THEN HERE'S WENDELL; THE SENSITIVE NEW-AGE SORT, VERY BRIGHT, WELL-MANNERED, EXCELLENT LINEAGE...AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, WRITING A BOOK AFFORDED HIM THE FLEXBILE SCHEDULE FOR DATING A WORKAHOLIC LAWYER.

PLUS I KNEW MAUREEN PREFERRED A STAY-AT-HOME HUSBAND OVER A NANNY--NO DOUBT SHE COULD AFFORD IT. STILL, THAT REALLY NARROWED HER OPTIONS.

BUT I FINALLY MANAGED TO COAX OUT OF WENDELL THAT HE DID, INDEED, TRULY WANT TO HAVE KIDS--AND NOT SOLELY BECAUSE HIS FAMILY WAS PRESSURING HIM FOR GRANDCHILDREN.

THAT WAS ALL I NEEDED TO HEAR TO INTRODUCE THE TWO OF THEM.

I ONLY HOPED THEY'D HIT IT OFF.

IN FACT, THEY TURNED OUT TO BE AN EXCELLENT MATCH. HE WAS NOT INTIMIDATED BY HER INTELLIGENCE AND CAREER. SHE LEARNED A LITTLE MORE ABOUT SPONTANEITY FROM HIM.

HE GAVE HER THE INROADS TO HIGH SOCIETY SHE HAD DREAMED OF IN COLLEGE. AND AS HE WAS A FEW YEARS YOUNGER AND A LITTLE SHELTERED, HE DIDN'T MIND LETTING HER BE THE WORLDLY ONE.

HOWEVER, SHE CONSTANTLY WORRIED SHE WAS TOO "LOW CLASS"--IF NOT FOR HIM, FOR HIS ENTIRE FAMILY SHE RAVED ABOUT WHAT A PROPER GENTLEMAN HE WAS, HOW TRADITIONAL HIS VALUES WERE..IT WAS ONLY LATER THAT I FIGURED OUT WHAT SHE MEANT. IT MADE ANY ADVANCEMENT IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP DOWNRIGHT GLACIAL, BUT SHE DIDN'T WANT TO OFFEND HIM, OR HIS FAMILY.

SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE WORRIED ABOUT HIS FAMILY; THEY THOUGHT HIGHLY OF HER, AND NO DOUBT THE PROSPECT OF HAVING A FUTURE JUSTICE AROUND DIDN'T HURT. I, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS JUST A GRUNGY LITTLE REPAIRMAN, NOT TO MENTION BY NOW I HAD A STEADY BOYFRIEND... I SERIOUSLY DOUBTED HIS CONSERVATIVE FAMILY WOULD THINK MUCH OF ME. SO I LAID LOW, AND KEPT TO MYSELF. BUT I DIDN'T MIND..I HAD MY OWN LIFE, AND THERE WAS NO POINT IN RUINING HER CHANCE AT HAPPINESS.

A COUPLE MORE YEARS PASSED, AND WENDELL KEPT STALLING ON POPPING THE BIG QUESTION--IN SPITE OF MANY HINTS. MAUREEN WAS GETING IMPATIENT, BUT SHE KNEW HOW TRADITIONAL HE WAS, AND WANTED TO LET HIM DO THINGS HIS WAY. SURELY IT WOULD ONLY BE A MATTER OF TIME.

THANKFULLY, IT WAS.

EVERYTHING WENT SMOOTHLY UNTIL THE BACHELOR PARTY, WHERE TWO OF WENDELL'S BUDDIES RECRUITED ME TO PLAY A LITTLE JOKE ON HIM.

HE WAS SUCH A PROPER LITTLE GUY, HE'D NEVER SEEN A STRIPPER, AND THEY'D HIRED SOME BABE TO GIVE HIM A LAPDANCE. BUT FIRST, THEY WANTED TO THROW HIM OFF BY HAVING ME POP OUT BEFORE THEY BROUGHT HER OUT.

I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO, BUT I WAS THE ONLY ONE THERE WITH THE BODY FOR IT, AND SOON I WAS TOO DRUNK TO CARE.

SO I PLAYED ALONG, HE PLAYED ALONG, AND EVERYONE HAD A GOOD LAUGH.

UNTIL, WELL...

THEY FOUND OUT WE WEREN'T JUST PLAYING ALONG.

SO...YEAH. WENDELL MADE A FULL CONFESSION...AND APOLOGY. HE WAS GAY, ALWAYS HAD BEEN.

AND WHILE HE REALLY DID WANT KIDS OF HIS OWN, HE WASN'T USING MAUREEN JUST FOR THAT; HE WAS QUITE FOND OF HER, AND HAD HOPED HE COULD TELL HER THE TRUTH...

AT SOME POINT.

PERHAPS IF SHE TRULY LOVED HIM BACK, THEY COULD HAVE WORKED SOMETHING OUT. MAYBE EVEN INDEFINITELY, FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILDREN.

BUT I'D THROWN A HUGE WRENCH IN THAT PLAN. I FELT TERRIBLE.

AW, YOU WERE DRUNK. HELL, HE WAS TOO! AND IT WASN'T EVEN YOUR IDEA.

IT WASN'T THAT... JUST THAT I'D KEPT MY ORIENTATION SECRET. IF I'D TOLD MAUREEN OR WENDELL EARLIER, THE END RESULT MIGHT HAVE HAVE BEEN THE SAME--MAYBE WENDELL WOULD'VE FOUND THE COURAGE TO COME OUT TO AN ALLY--BUT AT LEAST IT WOULDN'T HAVE EXPLODED SO PUBLICLY. WITH ALL THE GOSSIP FLYING AROUND, MAUREEN WAS FURIOUS AT ME.

THAT'S NOBODY'S BUSINESS BUT YOURS! YOU WEREN'T RESPONSIBLE FOR WENDELL'S COVER-UP!

WELL, WHOEVER'S FAULT IT WAS...THE WEDDING WAS OBVIOUSLY CALLED OFF AFTER THAT.

MAUREEN NEVER HEARD FROM WENDELL AGAIN; THE FAMILY BLAMED HER FOR BRINGING THE SO-CALLED "CORRUPTING INFLUENCE"--ME--TO THE SITUATION.

FORTUNATELY, IT'S GONE NO FURTHER THAN THAT... THEYHAVEN'T TRIED TO SABOTAGE HER CAREER OR ANYTHING. PROBABLY BECAUSE SHE SAID...ER, SCREAMED?...SHE WAS CUTTING ALL TIES WITH ME AFTERWARDS.

I TRIED TO CONTACT HER ONCE THINGS HAD COOLED DOWN A LITTLE, BUT SHE NEVER RETURNED MY CALLS.

EVENTUALLY, I FELT I HAD TO JUST MOVE ON WITH MY LIFE.

WHICH I NEVER COULD'VE DONE WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF MY BOYFRIEND JEREMY.

THEN ONE NIGHT, EARLIER THIS YEAR...

A WOMAN CAME TO DOOR, ASKING TO SEE JEREMY.

SAID IT WAS A FAMILY EMERGENCY.

THE EMERGENCY TURNED OUT TO BE AN AMBUSH BY HIS PARENTS, WHO WANTED A WORD WITH WHOEVER HAD "TURNED THEIR SON GAY."

THEY HAD PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE, AND I WAS POWERLESS TO DO MUCH BUT WATCH. AND PLEAD.

I WAS MORTIFIED... IN THIS DAY AND AGE OF CEL PHONE CAMERAS AND FACEBOOK AND BLOGS, THERE'S NO TELLING HOW THEY FOUND OUT. I KNEW HOW TOUCHY THINGS WERE AT HOME WITH HIM, AND I SHOULD'VE BEEN MORE CAREFUL...

I BLAMED MYSELF...AND A NUMBER OF MY FRIENDS DID, TOO.

UNTIL THE DAY I NOTICED A REFLECTION IN ONE OF THE PHOTOS LOOKED...

...FAMILIAR!

I'LL NEVER FORGET HOW COMPOSED SHE WAS...

YOU HAD NO RIGHT TO DO THAT! YOUR BEEF IS WITH ME; JEREMY'S DONE NOTHING WRONG!

DONE NOTHING WRONG? WHY WAS HE SKULKING AROUND, HIDING THINGS, LYING TO HIS PARENTS?

YOU KNOW DAMN WELL WHY, AND IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, ANYWAY!

ISN'T IT? TELL ME, BROTHER DEAR, HOW IS CAITLIN?

CAITLIN? WHAT'S SHE GOT TO DO WITH--

I SAW HIS WEBJOURNAL. JEREMY KNEW HE WAS GAY WHILE THEY WERE DATING, OR AT LEAST PRETENDING TO, RIGHT?

WELL--

WAS SHE HIS BEARD FOR HIS PARENTS? DID HE BREAK HER HEART?

I... I DON'T KNOW.

DON'T KNOW, OR DON'T CARE?

I--

AND WEREN'T *YOU* BANGING...WHAT'S HER NAME, LESLIE, IN HIGH SCHOOL?

YEAH, BUT...

...

AW, DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT. ***SOME*** OF US EXPERIMENTED MORE THAN YOU!

SORRY, SORRY, GO ON...

YOU THINK I ***ENJOYED*** THE COVER-UPS, OR FORCING MYSELF TO EXPLORE SOMETHING I HATED? C'MON, I WAS SCARED! IT'S NOT LIKE I COULD PRETEND MY HORMONES DIDN'T EXIST!

HEY, DON'T BLAME ME FOR THE WORLD'S DOUBLE STANDARDS.

FEH. TRY BEING A GIRL; THAT'S STANDARD PROCEDURE, UNLESS WE WANT TO BE LABELLED A "SLUT."

I'M NOT; JUST DON'T TELL ME THE EASY WAY WAS THE ONLY WAY.

GREAT... THEN WE SHOULD EITHER BE OUT, OR... A-SEXUAL?!

FINE. DO YOU PLAN TO OUT EVERY GAY GUY IN THE WORLD, OR ONLY THE CLOSET CASES I HAPPEN TO SNOOP?

IS IT THAT HARD TO PICK AN OPTION THAT ISN'T MISLEADING?

YOU'RE THE RISK-TAKER... WHY NOT FIND OUT? BUT YOU'D ALL HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR IF YOU'D JUST BE HONEST ABOUT IT. TO BOTH YOURSELVES, AND OTHERS.

THAT...PRETTY MUCH ENDED THE CONVERSATION THERE. AND I'VE BEEN LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER EVER SINCE.

SHE CONTACTS ME JUST FREQUENTLY AND RANDOMLY ENOUGH TO KEEP ME PARANOID. SOMETIMES SHE'LL BRING UP SPECIFICS FROM THE PAST WEEK, AND OTHER TIMES, SHE'S WATCHING AT THAT VERY MOMENT.

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50% OFF

SHE HASN'T OUTED ANYONE ELSE, BUT SHE GOT A LOT OF MY FRIENDS WORRIED. MOST OF THEM KINDA DISTANCED THEMSELVES FROM ME...THEY WERE CREEPED OUT BY THE POTENTIAL LACK OF PRIVACY.

SHE IMPLIED SHE'D IGNORE ANY BOYFRIENDS WHO WERE OPENLY GAY...I HAVE TRIED A COUPLE DATES SINCE THEN, BUT NOBODY SO FAR CLICKED.

I GUESS I WAS... JUST REALLY LONELY BY THE TIME I MET YOU THIS SUMMER. AND I APPROACHED YOU CUZ YOU SEEMED JUST AS ISOLATED YOURSELF...

I FIGURED, WHY NOT?

YOU THOUGHT I WAS DESPERATE ENOUGH FOR FRIENDS THAT SHE WOULDN'T SCARE ME?

HUH? HEH, NO, I THOUGHT YOU WERE STRAIGHT, AND SHE WOULDN'T CARE!

HA! MY MANLY-MAN FRONT WAS GOOD FOR SOMETHING THEN, EH?

I'M ACTUALLY KINDA DISTURBED THAT SHE GUESSED YOU WERE GAY BEFORE I DID. SURE, I DO CHASE BIGGER GUYS, AND SHE'D EXPECT YOU TO BE MY TYPE, BUT...

WAIT...SO YOU KNEW SHE WAS ON TO ME FROM THE GET-GO?

ER, YEAH... AND YOU ARE KIND OF A PRIME TARGET FOR HER, WHAT WITH USING SAM FOR A FRONT, AND ALL THAT.

SO THAT'S WHY YOU'VE BEEN COUNSELING ME ALL THIS TIME? YOU HOPED I'D COME OUT AND IT'D RUIN HER PLANS?

NO, NO, THAT NEVER CROSSED MY MIND. ALL I EVER WANTED WAS YOU TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH YOURSELF.

EVERYTHING ELSE WAS SECONDARY.

HEH, SORRY. ALRIGHT THEN, SO WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

"WE" NOTHING. THIS IS SOMETHING I HAVE TO DEAL WITH ON MY OWN.

PERHAPS SHE'LL SIMPLY GROW TIRED OF THE GAME EVENTUALLY. SHE'S GOTTA BELIEVE WE'RE EVEN SOMETIME.

BUT--

CODY, I DON'T WANT YOU TO GET INVOLVED ANY FURTHER. SHE'S JUST...TOO GOOD.

SHE'S BEEN ONE STEP AHEAD OF ME THIS WHOLE TIME. I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE DOES IT.

DOUBTFUL. WHO'D BE SICK ENOUGH TO HELP HER WITH THIS?

D'YOU THINK SHE'S RECRUITED SPIES?

REENA?

HMM?

IS... EVERYTHING OKAY?

OH, OF COURSE. WHY?

YOU HAD "THAT LOOK" AGAIN. I THOUGHT WE AGREED JEFF LEARNED HIS LESSON LAST WEEK. HE'S DONE WITH CODY.

TRUE. I SUPPOSE OLD HABITS DIE HARD.

SO...NO MORE DWELLING ON HIM...*OR* CODY EITHER?

ALL RIGHT. LONG AS YOU'RE POSITIVE CODY DID NOTHING TO THAT BARMAID.

THAT'S BETTER.

I'M SORRY, THEODORE, I KNOW ALL THE SPYING BOTHERED YOU.

SNIFF, I-IT'S ABOUT DOUG, NATE.

D-D'YOU HAVE A SEC?

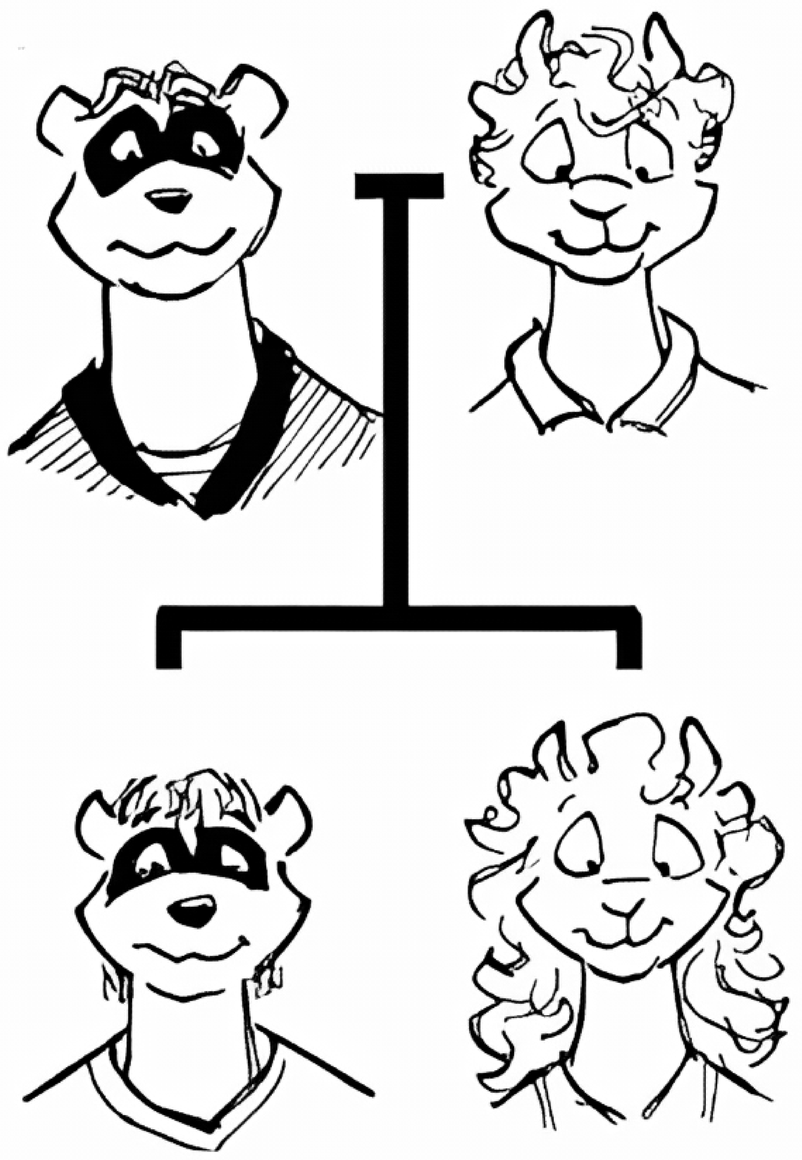
ACTUALLY, DOUG SEEMS NICE. MAYBE WITH JEFF'S BAD INFLUENCE GONE, DOUG'LL MAKE AN HONEST MAN OUT OF CODY YET...

SURE, WHY NOT?

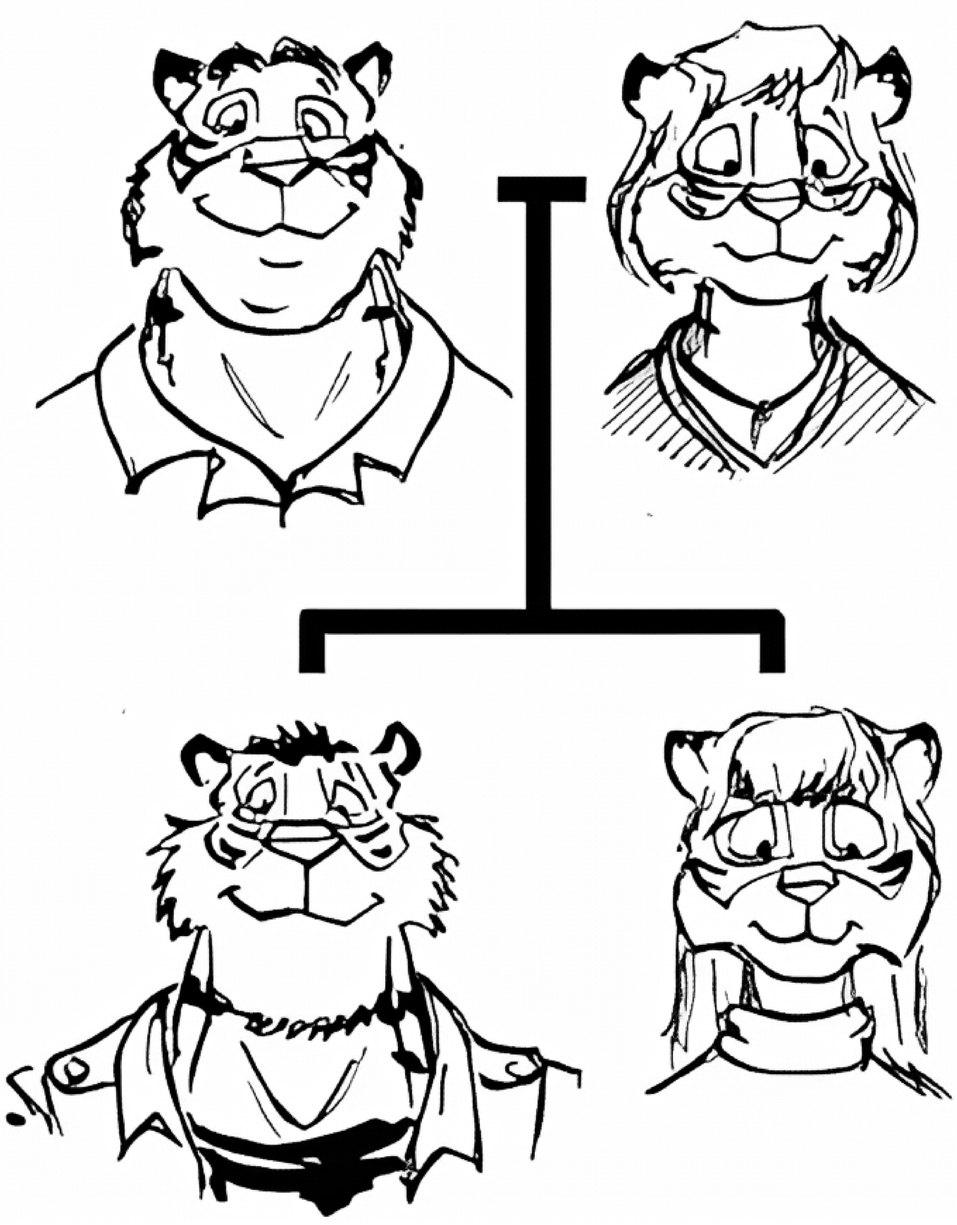
TO BE CONTINUED JANUARY 2010

AS RECENT ISSUES HAVE FOCUSED MORE ON MIXED-SPECIES COUPLES, I THOUGHT IT WAS TIME TO EXPLAIN THE GENETICS IN THIS WORLD.

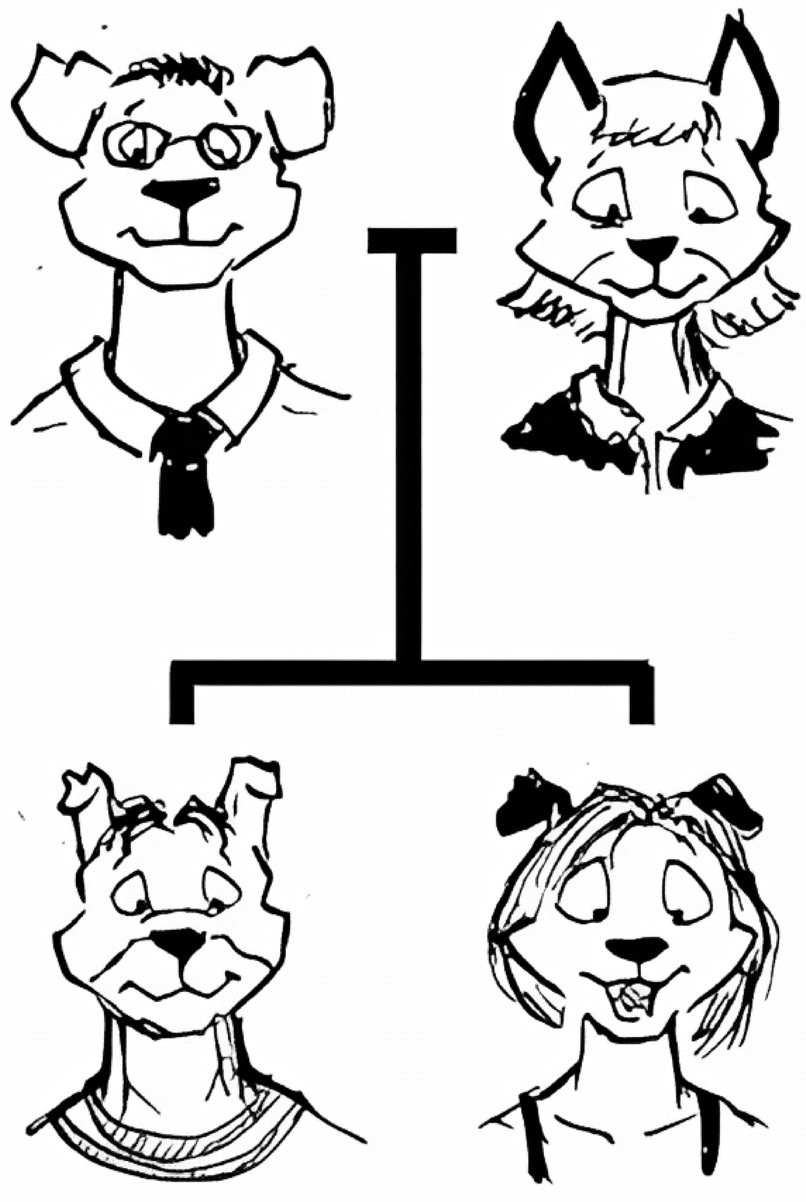
IF A COUPLE ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SPECIES, THE CHILDREN MUST MATCH THE SPECIES OF THE PARENT OF THE SAME GENDER. THUS, IF MAUREEN AND WENDELL HAD CHILDREN, ALL SONS WOULD BE FERRETS, AND ALL DAUGHTERS WOULD BE ALPACAS. NO PHYSICAL TRAITS WOULD CROSS OVER.



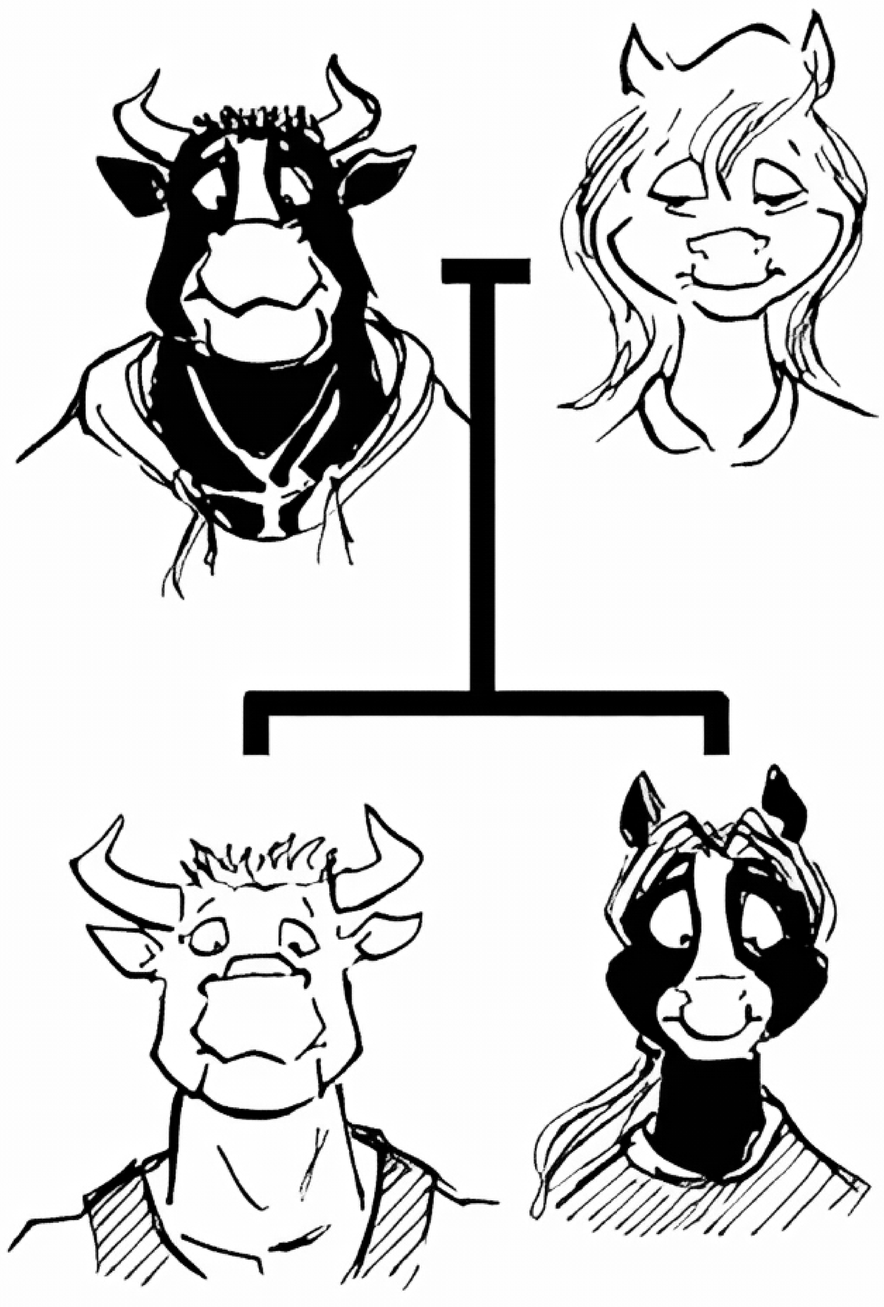
IF A COUPLE ARE THE SAME SPECIES, ALL TRAITS MAY POTENTIALLY MIX, REGARDLESS OF GENDER. NOTE THAT CODY HAS HIS FATHER'S FUR, BUILD, AND HAIR; BUT HE HAS HIS MOTHER'S MARKINGS AND FACE SHAPE. IF HE HAD A SISTER, SHE MIGHT RECEIVE A SIMILAR RANDOMIZED MIX OF TRAITS.



FOR ALL OTHER MIXED COUPLES INBETWEEN, THE MORE PHYSICAL RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN SPECIES, THE MORE LIKELY THE TRAITS WILL BLEND. HYBRIDIZATION MAY OCCUR WITHIN VERY CLOSE RELATIONS (IE CANIDS, EQUINES), BUT THIS IS RECESSIVE AND EASILY LOST WITH SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS. HERE, A MALE DOG AND A FEMALE FOX PRODUCE HYBRID CHILDREN OF BOTH GENDERS.



BEYOND A CERTAIN POINT, THE GENDER RULES ARE THE SAME AS WITH DIFFERENT SPECIES, BUT THERE IS STILL THE POSSIBILITY OF MIXING SUPERFICIAL TRAITS SUCH AS COLORATION, HEIGHT, BUILD, ETC. HERE A BULL AND A MARE PRODUCE CHILDREN WITH THEIR COLORATION SWAPPED.



HOPE THIS HELPS!

